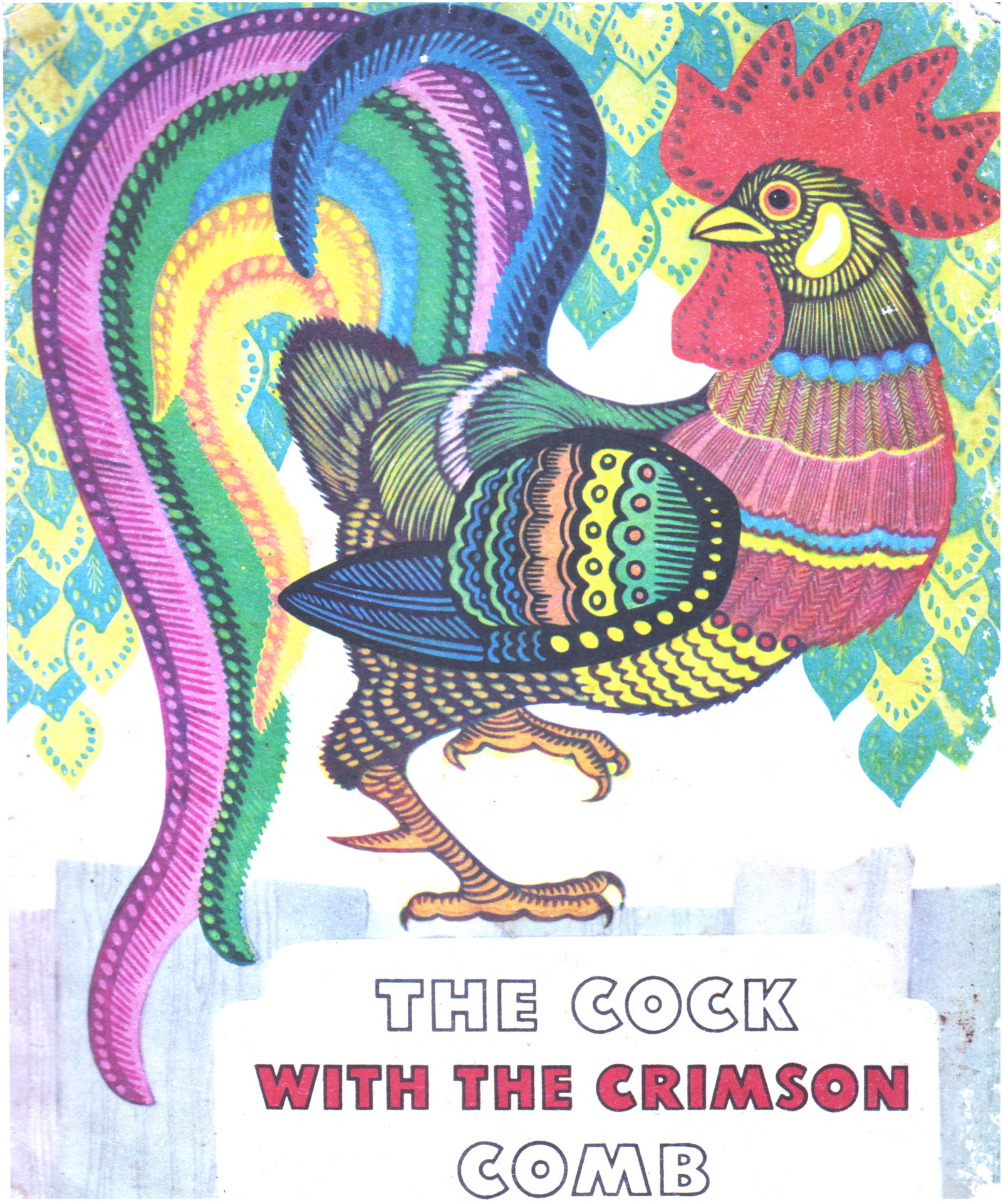

THE COCK WITH THE CRIMSON COMB

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A Karelian Fairy Tale
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Once upon a time there lived two little orphans, a brother and a sister. Their parents had died, leaving them nothing but a cock with a crimson comb.

One day, when there wasn't so much as a crumb of bread left to eat in the house, the brother said to the sister:

"Go to the barn and see if you can find anything there. I'm so hungry!"

The girl went to the barn, but it was empty, so she took a broom, swept the bin and found one rye grain.

She showed the grain to her brother and they decided to plant it.

They dug a little hole behind the house, put the grain in it and covered it with earth.

Early in the morning the brother looked, and what did he see but that the grain had sprung up into a stalk as thick as a pine-tree and so long that its crown reached the sky!

"A marvel if there ever was one!" thought the boy. "I think I'll see what is on top there."

And he began climbing the stalk.

He climbed and he climbed and when he reached the clouds saw that the stalk had pierced them and was stretching up even higher. So then he stepped out on to the clouds and set off straight across them. He walked and he walked and by and by came to a tiny little house. He opened the door and came inside, and there, sitting in a corner, was an ugly old woman. She had but one eye, a bulging one, and it gleamed like that of a kite. The old woman was turning the handle of a millstone, and pies and cakes were flying out from under it!

To look at the old woman was frightening, but to see her turning out the pies and cakes made one laugh, for they were whizzing across the room and landing in a sack that stood upright beside the stove!

The boy was very hungry and, without stopping to think, snatched up the sack, threw it over his shoulder and made off with it at a run. He got to the stalk and was down on the ground in no time.

"Look what I have brought!" said he to his sister.

Now that they had the sackful of pies and cakes, the brother and sister did not lack for food, but nothing lasts forever, and at last there came a day when they dipped into the sack only to find it empty!

What was there to be done! They could not very well go hungry, so the boy decided to climb the stalk again.

"Take me with you, brother!" said his sister.

"I can't do that," the brother replied. "You might cry out in fear when you see the old woman or burst out laughing at sight of the millstone, and then we'll be caught."

But the sister pleaded with him again, saying:

"I won't cry out or laugh, either. Do take me with you, brother!"

So he took her with him and they began climbing the stalk together. They reached the sky, and, stepping out on to the clouds, found the road and walked along it.

They walked and they walked and by and by reached the tiny little house.

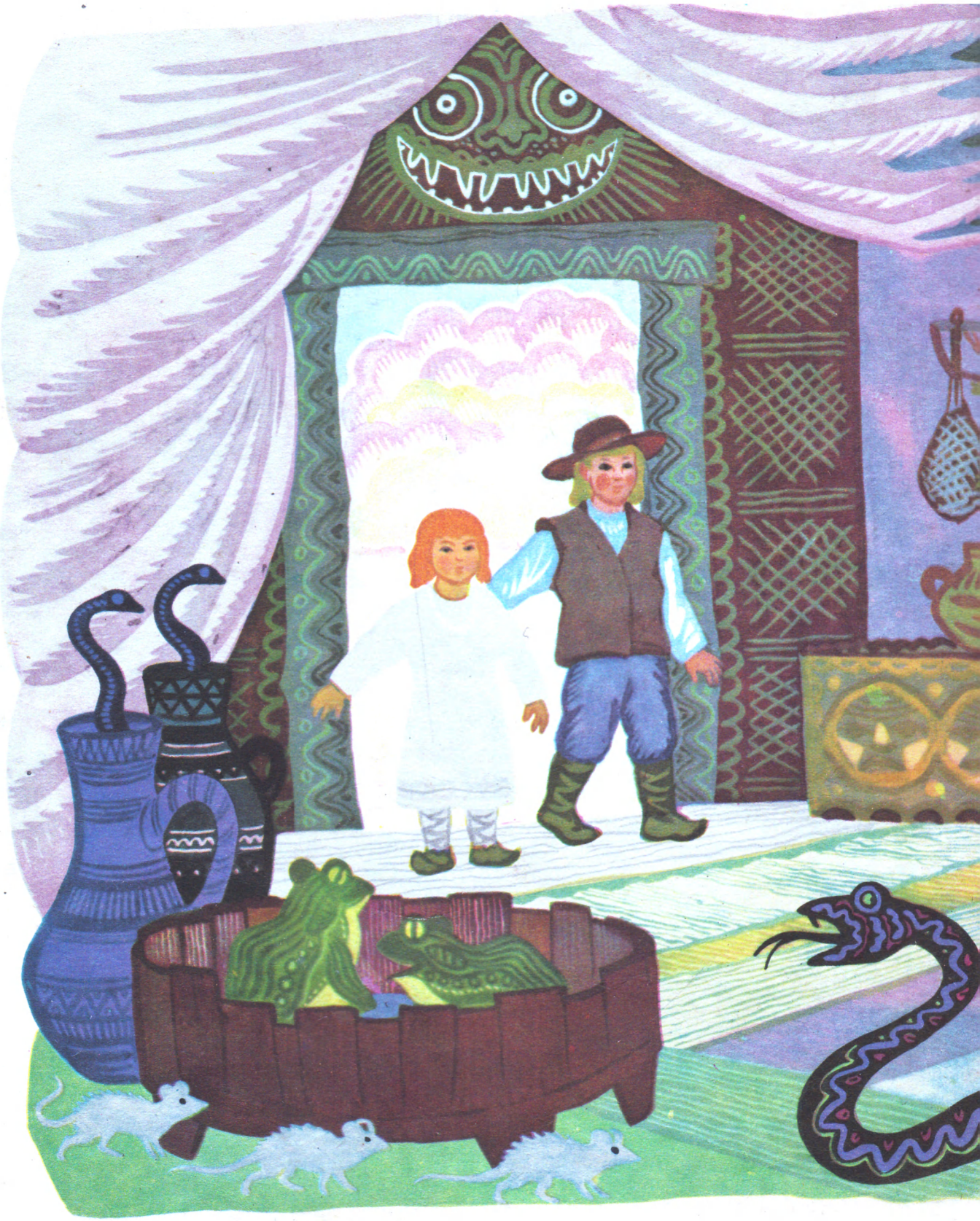
They came inside, and there in the corner, turning the handle of the millstone, sat the ugly old woman. She had only one eye, a bulging one, and it gleamed like that of a kite.

"Oh, oh, I'm frightened!" the sister cried out softly.

But the brother said nothing and only gave her a little nudge to remind her that the old woman might hear them and then they'd be in trouble.

The old woman went on turning the millstone handle and—oh, wonder of wonders!—the pies and cakes came flying out from under it one after another and whizzing through the air. So strange and funny did this seem to the sister that she could not stop herself and burst out laughing.

It was a teenly little laugh, and not loud, but the old woman heard her. She turned, and, seeing the brother and sister, cried:



"Aha! I've got you now! You were the ones who carried off all my pies and cakes."

The brother and sister said nothing and stood there more dead than alive.

The old woman lit the stove.

"I'm going to roast and eat you!" said she. "Come, my lad, be quick and get on my spade. You'll go into the stove first!"

The boy sat down on the spade, but he thrust out his legs and his arms so that the old woman, try as she would, could not get him into the stove.

Said the old woman:

"You've done it all wrong! You must sit with your head to the stove, not your feet."

Said the boy in reply:

"I don't know what you mean, grandma. Why don't you sit down on the spade yourself and show me how to do it?"

The old witch sat down on the spade, her body bent double and her head to the stove, and the boy at once thrust her into it!

The brother and sister were safe now and happy, and, taking the millstone, climbed down the stalk and went home.

With the millstone to grind out the pies and cakes for them and the cock with the crimson comb to keep them company, they had not a care in the world and passed the time very gaily indeed!

But one day the tsar heard of the magic millstone. He sent his servants after it, and they came and took it away from the brother and sister.

The poor little orphans soon ran out of all their food and went hungry again.

The sister wept and the brother wept, but the cock heard them, and, strutting across the hut to their side, said:

"Cluck-cluck-cluck! I'm going to take the millstone away from the tsar!"

And off he went to see the tsar.

He walked and he walked and he met a bear.

"Where are you going?" asked the bear.

"Aha! I've got you now! You were the ones who carried off all my pies and cakes."

The brother and sister said nothing and stood there more dead than alive.

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And off he went to see the tsar.

He walked and he walked and he met a bear.

"Where are you going?" asked the bear.

"To get back the millstone from the tsar. He took it away from two little orphans."

"May I come with you?" asked the bear.

"Go ahead! Just get under my right wing."

The bear got under the cock's right wing, and the cock set off on his way again.

He walked and he walked and he met a wolf.

"Where are you going, cock?" asked the wolf.

"To get back the millstone from the tsar. He took it away from two little orphans."

"May I come with you?"

"Go ahead! Get under my left wing."

The wolf got under the cock's left wing, and the cock set off on his way again.

He walked and he walked and he came to a little lake by the wayside.

"Where are you going, cock?" asked the lake.

"To get back the millstone from the tsar. He took it away from two little orphans."

"May I come with you?"

"Go ahead! You'll just about fit in my crop."

The cock drank up the lake and went on again.

He came to the tsar's house, and, standing under the tsar's bedchamber window, sang out:

"I, a cock, have a crimson comb, but the wicked tsar has nothing like it! He took away their millstone from two poor little orphans, and he dines in style while they go hungry."

The tsar was very angry and he bade his servants drive away the cock. But the cock jumped out of their reach and called out again:

"I, a cock, have a crimson comb, but the wicked tsar has nothing like it! He took away their millstone from two poor little orphans, and he dines in style while they go hungry."

The tsar then bade his servants seize the cock and throw him into the stable for his wild horses to trample to death. The servants seized the cock and threw him into the stable, but the cock let out the bear from under his right wing, and the bear killed the horses.

On the following morning the servants came to the stable and unlocked the door, but the cock rushed out, flew up to the window of the tsar's bedchamber and sang out:

"I, a cock, have a crimson comb, but the wicked tsar has nothing like it! He took away their millstone from two poor little orphans, and he dines in style while they go hungry."

At this the tsar flew into a terrible rage and he bade his servants throw the cock into a sheep pen for the wild rams to gore to death.

The servants did as he told them, but the cock was not frightened. He let out the wolf from under his left wing, and the wolf killed all the rams.

On the following morning the tsar's servants came to see what there was to see, and the cock rushed out, flew up to the tsar's palace, and, standing under his bedchamber window, sang out:

"I, a cock, have a crimson comb, but the wicked tsar has nothing like it! He took away their millstone from two poor little orphans, and he dines in style while they go hungry."

The tsar shook with rage and helplessness, for he did not know how to get rid of the cock.

He called his servants and bade them heat his iron bathhouse till it was red-hot and throw the cock into it for him to be roasted to death.

The servants threw the cock into the bathhouse, but the cock let out all the water from his crop, and lo!—the bathhouse was flooded and as cool as cool can be.

On the following morning the tsar's servants came to the bathhouse and opened the door, and the cock rushed out, flew to the tsar's palace, and, standing under the tsar's bedchamber window, sang out:

"I, a cock, have a crimson comb, but the wicked tsar has nothing like it! He took away their millstone from two poor little orphans, and he dines in style while they go hungry."

The tsar's head went round with his trying to think what to do with the cock. He bade his servants seize him and cook him for his breakfast. But so overcome was he with rage that he could not wait for them to do it but swallowed the cock alive and whole.

The cock sang out from the tsar's belly:

"I, a cock, have a crimson comb, but the wicked tsar has nothing like it! He took away their millstone from two poor little orphans, and he dines in style while they go hungry."

The tsar began to plead with the cock.

"Do come out from my belly, little cock, and leave me alone," said he. "I won't touch you again, I promise you!"

"No, I won't!" said the cock. "Not till you give back their millstone to the two little orphans."

And he sang out again:

"I, a cock, have a crimson comb, but the wicked tsar has nothing like it! He took away their millstone from two poor little orphans, and he dines in style while they go hungry."

The people stood there and listened and they laughed at the wicked tsar. There was nothing to be done, so the wicked tsar gave back their millstone to the orphans. And as for the cock, he jumped out from the tsar's belly and ran home.

The brother and sister were overjoyed to see him, and from that time on the three of them lived happily together. So many pies and cakes did the millstone turn out that they never went hungry again and always had enough left over to share with other poor folk like themselves.

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